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Divorced Parents and Child-Rearing Consumption Practices

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Honors Thesis
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April 7, 2011

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I. ABSTRACT

This study explores how the child-rearing consumption practices of divorced parents are influenced by the financial, logistical, and emotional dilemmas of parenting after divorce. Findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with ten divorced parents who had children ranging from six to thirteen years of age. Data analysis revealed two incongruent discourses, which I call Ideal Consumption and Realistic Consumption. Parents used ideal consumption to portray themselves as model consumers; while realistic consumption bluntly acknowledged divorce's impact their spending. This research demonstrates how society's perception of culturally appropriate child-rearing consumption does not recognize spending related to divorce.

II. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, children have taken a central role in U.S. consumer culture (Schor 2004). Contemporary American youth have been dubbed the “most brand-oriented, consumer-involved, and materialistic generations in history” (Schor 2004: 13). Furthermore, U.S. children, more than anywhere else in the world, believe that their clothes, brands, and material items characterize who they are and define their social status (Paul 2008). Sociologists have described modern children’s unprecedented consumerism as the *commercialization of childhood*, implying that contemporary children’s lives revolve around consumer products (Schor 2004). Nevertheless, this spending depends upon parents.

Pugh (2009) refers to consumption that parents do on behalf of children as “child-rearing consumption.” Notably, U.S. parents spend more money on children’s products than do parents in all other industrialized nations (Schor 2004). Recent research affirms that today’s parents view child-rearing consumption as a way to show their love and care for children (Schor 2004; Paul 2008; Pugh 2009). Moreover, spending on children has emotional benefits in that it makes both parents and children happy and content (Schor 2004; Paul 2008; Pugh 2009). Although numerous studies look at prevailing parental consumption practices, none specifically investigate the effects of divorce.

Research on the day-to-day lives of divorced families’ dates back to the 1980s and 1990s. Given that most of these studies are outdated, findings do not account for subsequent cultural changes, such as increases in child consumerism. My research differs from previous work because it examines the ways in which divorce impacts child-rearing consumption. In particular, it explores how parents’ consumer choices are shaped by the

emotional, financial, and logistical dilemmas of parenting after divorce. Studying divorced parents' contemporary consumption practices adds a new and important perspective to current sociological literature on the family.

This paper is comprised of five sections. First, I introduce the general topics of child consumerism and divorce to illustrate how my study adds to current sociological knowledge. Second, the literature review summarizes existing research on divorce and consumption. Third, I report on the qualitative methods employed in this study. Fourth, I explicate prominent themes in participants' interviews and overall findings, describing the two discourses divorce parents use to talk about their child-rearing consumption practices. Finally, the fifth section discusses how society's perception of culturally appropriate consumption does not leave room for spending related to divorce and includes future implications of this research.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent cultural changes have increased the rates of both divorce and child consumerism in U.S. society. However, studies have not examined how these topics shape contemporary families; no research has been published regarding the daily lives of divorced families, the consumption practices of divorced parents, or the roles of modern divorced mothers and fathers. This literature review assesses existing research on divorce and child-rearing consumption, and simultaneously underscores the gaps in our sociological understandings of contemporary families that my study aims to fill.

A. Divorce

Approximately half of all U.S. marriages end in divorce, many involving children (Cherlin 2005). Current estimates suggest that 1 million children per year experience their parents' divorces (Cohen 2002). However, recent research addresses only the cultural origins of U.S. divorce, which by in large ignores modern divorced families' day-to-day lives. Accordingly, this literature review discusses two cultural changes that have impacted the roles of mothers and fathers in the family. First, Hays (1996) affirms that family transformations in U.S. society produced a new cultural mandate termed *intensive mothering*; yet, no studies have looked at how intensive mothering affects divorced mothers. Second, modern family ideals stress the importance of joint custody (Wallace and Koerner 2003), but there is little research on how co-custodial families negotiate life after divorce. To begin, I review the historical changes that boosted divorce rates and then explain the issues surrounding intensive mothering and joint custody.

Many sociologists believe that *contradictory cultural ideals* caused U.S. society's high rate of divorce. (Morrison and Cherlin 1995; Swidler 2001; Cherlin 2005; Cherlin 2009). In particular, the desire of contemporary husbands and wives for *individualism* within marriage often conflicts with the *traditional family roles* of breadwinning fathers, homemaking mothers, and responsible parents (Morrison and Cherlin 1995; Cherlin 2005; Cherlin 2009). A historical perspective on divorce reveals the origins of these contrasting ideals (Cherlin 2009).

In the early and mid-twentieth century, U.S. society predominately valued *companionate* marriage (Cherlin 2009). This cultural ideal centers on the “emotional ties between wife and husband—their companionship, friendship, and romantic love” (Cherlin 2005: 40). In this scenario, the only culturally appropriate way to establish a family is to get married, have children, and assume the role of breadwinner-father or homemaker-mother (Cherlin 2005). Cherlin (2005) affirms that people in companionate marriages find performing traditional gender roles rewarding. Until the 1950s, this type of marriage was the societal norm (Cherlin 2005).

Beginning in the 1960s, however, marriage went through a major cultural shift wherein society started to value *individualized* marriage (Cherlin 2005). In this arrangement, there is an emphasis is on both people developing independent and fulfilling senses of self, instead of entirely dedicating themselves to their partners (Cherlin 2005). In the last part of the twentieth century, people began to evaluate marital satisfaction “in terms of developing their own sense of self and less in terms of gaining satisfaction through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent.” This marks the cultural shift from companionate to individualized marriages (Cherlin 2005: 41).

When companionate lifestyles dominated society, only ten percent of all marriages ended in divorce (Cherlin 2009). But divorce rates reached unprecedented levels after the 1960s and have continued to increase; currently about fifty percent of all married couples are expected to divorce within the next twenty years (Cherlin 2005). Cherlin (2005) states that in societies that value individualism, marriage is more likely to dissolve if one's personal gains and rewards seem insufficient. This illustrates how divorce correlates with an individualized society. Notably, the prevalence of divorce in contemporary society means that single-parent families are now a socially acceptable family form (Cherlin 2005).

So why do people continue to marry when alternative family arrangements have gained social acceptability? Today, marriage is an option in the United States, not a cultural mandate (Cherlin 2005). Consequently, marriage's symbolic importance has increased and remains highly valued (Cherlin 2005; Morrison and Cherlin 1995). Marriage is now a status symbol tied to individualism. It is a sign of prestige because it is "something to be achieved through one's own efforts rather than something to which one routinely accedes" (Morrison and Cherlin 1995: 855). Furthermore, surveys consistently find that marriage is the preferred option for most people (Cherlin 2005). Ultimately, U.S. society continues to value traditional marriage over any other family arrangement. As a result, divorce continues to be stigmatized in wider society, even though it has become more common.

Most people today value elements of both companionate marriage and individualized marriage, but Americans generally place a premium on companionate marriage and traditional family roles (Cherlin 2005). Goldstein and Kennedy (2001) estimate that ninety percent of Americans will eventually marry. Yet, high rates of divorce

indicate that marriages based on traditional social roles are not rewarding for some people, largely because of widespread individualistic values (Cherlin 2005). *The cultural contradiction that causes increased rates of divorce stems from the incompatible ideals of companionate and individualized marriage.* While most adults choose to get married and implement traditional gender roles, the desire to be an individualist eventually compels many spouses to divorce.

These contradictory values have significantly affected the family role of contemporary mothers. With the rise of individualized marriage, gender roles became more flexible and negotiable, although women still performed most household work and child rearing (Cancian 1987). In the 1970s, however, marriages in which both husband and wife were employed outside the home became commonplace as more women entered the workforce due to economic hardships (Cherlin 2005). Today, nearly half of all mothers with young children engage in some form of paid labor (Hays 1996). But, perplexingly, in response to an increasingly individualized society where self-gains guide behavior, mother's role in family life has intensified (Hays 1996). As Hays (1996) notes:

One might expect that women would fully assimilate to the logic of the marketplace, that the barrier between home and world would completely crumble, and that the rational calculation of self-interest would lead all of us to perceive child rearing is a fairly simple task. Yet the commitment to emotionally demanding, financially draining, labor-consuming child rearing seems to be thriving (p. 4).

Thus, women's participation in the labor force augmented mother's role as primary caregiver, a phenomenon Hays (1996) calls *the cultural contradiction of motherhood*. Theoretically, a mother's boost in employment should have devalued her care-giving duties; instead, the demands on modern mothers have increased over time.

Hays (1996) argues that women today are forced to adhere to *intensive mothering*, a cultural mandate that construes appropriate child-rearing as “*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*” (p. 8). This requires modern mothers to work much harder than previous generations. According to this ideology, all mothers should prioritize child-rearing over paid work. Also, intensive mothering leaves no room to parent in an alternative way so those who deviate from these principles are stigmatized by society (Hays 1996).

Intensive mothering reflects society’s contradictory cultural ideals. On the one hand, individualized values encourage women to enter the workforce and find self-fulfillment in the public sphere. On the other hand, companionate ideals compel mothers to enact traditional roles. Hays (1996) claims that the cultural shift of the 1960s created a depersonalized and individuated society, leading society to sentimentalize mother-child relationships. This emphasis on the mother-child dyad means the demands of appropriate mothering have increased. Interestingly, there are still no studies that address the ways in which divorced mothers manage intensive mothering ideals, even though research asserts that divorce typically reduces a mother’s finances and necessitates her employment post-divorce (Winner 1996).

The shift to individualized marriage and the idea of flexible roles also affects fathers, particularly in the context of divorce. Sullivan (2010) notes that over the past three decades fathers have gradually taken on more household and childcare duties; thus, father’s strict role as breadwinner is starting to wane. Today, U.S. culture places a stronger emphasis on shared custody arrangements and stresses the importance of a father’s engagement in his children’s lives (Wallace and Koerner 2003; Cherlin 2009). Prior to the 1960s, mothers typically retained full custody of children post-divorce, but

now fathers are much more likely to be granted joint custody due to individualistic values (Wallace and Koerner 2003). This requires fathers to take on all child-rearing duties when children are in their homes and contradicts the traditional role of fathers.

In sum, the roles of both mothers and fathers have changed in modernity, and this seems especially true for divorced parents. Cherlin (2009) contends that divorced parents predominantly engage in *parallel parenting*, meaning each person operates as independently as possible. Research reveals that after three years of divorce, there is “surprisingly little coordination between parents” (Cherlin 2009: 78). Essentially, this means divorced parents are autonomously responsible for all breadwinning, caretaking, and household duties, which epitomizes society’s individualistic values. Nevertheless, parallel parenting has not been studied in enough detail; for instance, we do not know how this phenomenon applies to the consumption practices of divorced parents.

Overall, literature reports on broad cultural changes and conflicting ideals to explain divorce. Specifically, the incompatible ideals of individualized and companionate marriages reinforce U.S. society’s high rates of marriage and divorce. These studies are useful because they help us understand how divorce manifests; nonetheless, they report only on widespread trends. Unfortunately, research that looks at the day-to-day processes of divorced families tends to be limited and outdated.

B. Consumption

Child-rearing consumption is one facet of family life that is completely ignored in divorce literature. While countless studies look at parental consumption in general, none specifically address that of divorced parents. As noted, the United States is the most consumer-oriented society in the world (Schor 2004; Paul 2008) and U.S. parents work

longer hours and spend more money on children than all other industrialized nations (Schor 2004; Paul 2008). In the past twenty years, children have become the epicenter of American consumerism. Child-rearing consumption has reached unprecedented levels and research asserts that it will continue to rise, regardless of the country's economic circumstances (Lynn 2004; Schor 2004). Sociologists refer to American youth's obsession with brands and material items as the *commercialization of childhood* (Schor 2004). In 2004, for example, parents spent \$670 billion on children's products alone (Pugh 2009). This raises the question: why are parents spending so much money on their children?

Many scholars theorize that increased consumption, "by its sheer domination of childhood today, establishes a new cultural environment, with new expectations about what parents should provide, what children should have, and what having, or not having, signifies" (Pugh 2009: 5). Sociologists believe that consumption has become a symbolic act that is used to connect buyers with other people (Lynn 2004; Schor 2004; Paul 2008; Pugh 2009). Specifically, consumption has become a way for parents to demonstrate love and care for their children (Pugh 2009). While intensive mothering can be seen as the result of an increasingly individualized society (Hays 1996), some argue that child-rearing consumption has also increased in response to a depersonalized society that has lost its emotional ties to others (Trentmann 2004). Thus, an individualized society compels people to consume as a way to relate to others and form emotional connections. The mentality fostered by our consumerist culture is: "The more we spend on children, *the more we care*" (Paul 2008: 30).

In addition, experts in child consumerism report that a parent's feelings of guilt often compel spending (Lynn 2004; Schor 2004; Paul 2008; Pugh 2009). Schor (2004) found that parents who spent more hours working bought more things for children;

conversely, parents who spent more time with children consumed less. She refers to such spending as “guilt money” because it comes up so often during interviews with parents (Schor 2004: 26). Paul (2008) also found that high-income parents are even more inclined to consume due to “guilt and insecurity” over not spending enough time with children, especially because these parents tend to have demanding jobs and work long hours (p. 74). Moreover, Stan Fridstein, a former advertising executive and current owner of *Baby Magazine*, admitted that companies hone in on parental guilt:

The real reason people would buy things is because they wanted the best for their kids and they felt extraordinary levels of guilt because they were working. They substitute a lot of that profound guilt with what they could buy for their kids...[But] you *never* sell on guilt—never ever. You’re never going to make a sale saying, “We know you feel guilty because you’re out on the road all the time...” Instead our sell was “This is the best stuff available. We’ve done it *for* you” (Paul 2008: 61).

Fridstein’s comments illustrate how marketers covertly target feelings of guilt to encourage parents to spend. This executive also admits that playing off parental guilt is a top priority for companies selling children’s products, which highlights the pervasiveness of parental guilt in society. Although guilt is undeniably related to spending, there is still no research on how the emotions of divorced parents, including feelings of guilt, influence consumption practices.

Still, child-rearing consumption is complicated. Parents understand the strong cultural sanctions against over-consuming and spoiling children (Pugh 2009). Yet, at the same time, they are supposed to provide for their children to the best of their abilities (Pugh 2009). These incongruent ethics make child-rearing consumption a double-edged sword. Furthermore, consumption forges emotional connections, shows care, reduces guilt, and ultimately makes children happy, which makes saying no to children’s desires very difficult for parents, especially in a consumer-driven society (Paul 2008; Pugh 2009).

Although people are concerned about the issues of divorce and consumption, we still know very little about how they work. Research on these topics focuses on broad cultural trends and ultimately concludes that the shift to an individualized society increased rates of divorce and amplified child-rearing consumption as a way for parents to connect with their children. However, it is likely that divorced parent child-rearing consumption is affected by multiple factors such as the cultural stigmas attached to divorce, parental finances, new living arrangements, and divorce-related emotions. In contrast to existing literature, my study attempts to uncover how divorce influences parents' child-rearing consumption choices.

IV. METHODS

For this research, I conducted in-depth interviews with divorced parents. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions regarding how divorced parents made consumption choices on behalf of their children. These questions worked as platforms for conversation and allowed participants to openly share their experiences. It also gave interviewees a great deal of flexibility when selecting the most salient effects of divorce on their spending. Oftentimes participants articulated aspects of divorce and parental consumption that diverged from existing research on these topics.

Recruitment was primarily based on a convenience sample. Given that I do not have a lot of access to divorced parents, my parents acted as sponsors and introduced me to their friends who met criteria for participation in this research (Rallis and Rossman 2003). Convenience sampling put me in contact with Aubrey, Tessa, Nancy, Erica, Janet, Leo, and Jessica. Additionally, I used snowball sampling and asked interviewees if they would be willing to help me recruit. This put me in touch with Amanda, Brian, and Michael. I also attempted to recruit more participants through fliers posted at the University of Colorado's main campus, the Boulder YMCA, the Boulder recreational center, and the Boulder public library; however, no one responded to the fliers (see page 79 for a copy of the recruitment flier). Notably, I had better rapport with participants who were recruited via convenience because they knew either my parents or myself well (Rallis and Rossman 2003). These participants provided more detailed and frank interview responses than those who I contacted through snowball sampling.

To qualify for enrollment, subjects had to meet the following requirements: be a divorced parent (or in the process of divorce); have children between the ages of six and thirteen; live in a separate household from one's ex-spouse; and have shared custody of

children. The primary reason for studying parents with children ages six to thirteen is that this is the time when parents are still in control of what their child can or cannot consume, while children are also old enough to have significant opinions about what they need and desire (Pugh 2009). Also, this study necessitated a particular type of post-divorce family arrangement wherein parents have joint custody and live in separate households, meaning they must coordinate their independent lives around a shared child. This family formation ensured that findings about consumption were attributable to divorced co-parenting, as opposed to single-parent families.

I interviewed ten divorced parents for this study—seven women and three men. Subjects ranged from 38-72 years of age and had one to four children. Most participants had only experienced one divorce and no remarriages. However, Leo, Tessa, and Brian had all been divorced and remarried at least two times. This sample is comprised of middle- and upper-class families from Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington. I made the assumption that subjects were in the upper echelons of society based on their occupations (see page 71) and their ability to afford expensive material items and vacations that were mentioned during interviews. Moreover, I had been to six participants' homes either previously or specifically for the interviews. All of their houses had at least three bedrooms, were nicely furnished, contained lavish child-centered bonus rooms and/or backyards, and exhibited superfluous amenities such as large flat-screen televisions, swimming pools, and luxury cars. For these reasons, my results reflect middle- and upper-class divorced parents' perspectives on child-rearing consumption. To see a summary chart of my sample, turn to page 71 in the appendices.

Data collection took place from November 2010 to February 2011.

Interviews consisted of twenty questions that aimed to uncover how consumption choices are influenced by the emotional, financial, and logistical dilemmas of parenting after divorce. Using a guided interview approach helped ensure that data was consistent and comparable (see page 73 for a copy of the interview schedule)(Rallis and Rossman 2003). Six interviews were conducted in Oregon and Washington, three in participants' homes and three at local coffee shops. Due to scheduling conflicts, I also had to do four telephone interviews. Most interviews took approximately thirty-five minutes, although they ranged from fourteen minutes to an hour and nine minutes. Unfortunately, Aubrey's recording was damaged and incomprehensible, so her data was based on handwritten notes that I took during her interview.

After I finished transcribing interviews, I began coding my data. This was accomplished by identifying significant and reoccurring themes that were prominent in a majority of interviews. I initially found these themes by highlighting dialogue that specifically addressed the effects of divorce on consumption. By doing this, I discovered two distinct discourses that interviewees used to describe spending practices. I further recoded data into palpable themes within each strand of talk. Coding effectively organized interview responses and permitted me to analyze findings from a sociological perspective.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed by e-mail about the purpose of the study and its conceptual framework. I also obtained written consent from each interviewee that permitted me to audio-record our conversation and guaranteed the subject's confidentiality (see page 75 for a copy of the consent form). All participants allowed me to record their interviews. They were aware that their participation was voluntary and understood they had the right to skip questions and withdraw from the

study at any point; however, no participants revoked their consent. To protect the subjects' identities, all names were replaced with pseudonyms.

A. Limitations of Research

The primary weakness of this study is its limited sample size. Given that I am a twenty-two year old undergraduate student, it was difficult for me to access divorced parents with young children. Moreover, because my sample consists of ten people, it may not be representative of all divorced parents' child-rearing consumption practices. In particular, findings are not applicable to low-income divorced parents. Nevertheless, this qualitative design was appropriate because it allowed me to ascertain the fundamental ways in which divorce impacts parents' spending.

Additionally, some interviewees seemed uncomfortable talking about child-rearing consumption. One participant in particular became very hostile and defensive in response to questions about consumption, which resulted in my shortest interview. Also, at the end of another participant's interview, she asked if I was purposefully trying to portray divorced parents' spending in a negative light, which I was not. I believe such perceptions made these two interviewees hold back and restricted their responses. Notably, both of these people were recruited through snowball sampling and their interviews took place over the phone.

V. FINDINGS

Coding analysis revealed competing discourses regarding divorced parents' child-rearing consumption. The language participants used to discuss spending was intended to legitimize consumption in two contradictory ways: *Ideal* and *Realistic*. First, parents' statements emphasized ideal consumption. This dialogue focused on consumption that increased parents' quality time with children. It also described the ways in which divorced parents restrain children's spending. Typically, U.S. society typecasts divorced parents as "over-consumers" who "materialize love" (Hochschild 1983). To disprove this stereotype, divorced parents felt compelled to emphasize ideal consumption during interviews. By portraying themselves as *ideal parent consumers*, participants underscored culturally acceptable patterns of consumption, thus discrediting divorce-consumer stereotypes.

Second, divorced parents' interview responses also showed signs of realistic consumption, which bluntly acknowledged the impact of divorce on spending. In this strand of talk, parents admitted that divorce inevitably influenced child-rearing consumption, albeit to varying degrees. Participants explained that divorce produced distinct financial, logistical, and emotional dilemmas that significantly affected what they bought. Ultimately, parents vacillated between the incongruent discourses of ideal and realistic consumption as they addressed post-divorce practices. For this reason, the subsequent findings are divided into three parts: Ideal Consumption, Realistic Consumption, and the Interaction Between Ideal and Realistic Consumption.

A. Ideal Consumption

The following explicates divorced parents' ideas about exceptional child-rearing consumption practices. The first section, *Defensive Othering*, demonstrates how divorced parents acknowledge negative stereotypes by defining themselves in opposition to "bad" others. The second section, *The Ideal Parent Consumer*, touches on the four elements that parents believe they should emulate. The topic of Ideal Parent Consumer is further divided into four subsections. In the first section, I show how participants accentuate consumption practices that require children and parents to interact and spend time together. In the subsequent three sections, I report on the methods parents use to control and delay child-rearing consumption. Notably, each component of ideal consumption constructs interviewees as model consumers.

i. Defensive Othering

Participants were hyper-aware of the cultural stigma surrounding divorce and consumption. According to interviewees' reports, divorced parents are stigmatized as frivolous consumers who buy items to compensate for putting their children through a divorce. Participants' understanding of the stereotypical divorced parent consumer was obvious by their use of *defensive othering*, which is an interactive process that reinforces stigmatizing labels by arguing that the label is true for others, but not for oneself (Ezzell 2009). In this study, all participants consistently portrayed themselves as model consumers by pointing out flaws in others' consumption. Parents engaged in defensive othering to distance themselves from the negative labels associated with divorce child-rearing consumption.

For instance, when Nancy, a recently divorced mother, was discussing her son's desire for a new Nintendo DS, she said, "I'm not one to go buy another electronic that's just like the Wii...His dad, on the other hand, can be "Santa Claus Dad" now that the divorce is started and, umm, it wouldn't surprise me if [a Nintendo DS] walked in." In this example, Nancy makes a clear distinction between her spending and her ex-husband's. Moreover, she implies that consuming unnecessarily to satisfy children's whims represents irresponsible spending. Nancy also contends that the divorce is what enabled her ex-husband to take on the role of "Santa Claus Dad," which reflects the stigma of divorced parent consumption practices.

Still, defensive othering reveals that divorced parents' consumption involves more than mere materialism. In capitalist society, consumption has evolved into a form of care that allows parents to connect with their children (Paul 2008; Pugh 2009). Yet, divorce parents are criticized for using material items to enhance parent-child relations more often than married parents. Consequently, participants used defensive othering to authenticate parent-child relationships, or as one divorced father put it, "I never tried to buy her love. Okay? She loves me regardless of what I buy."

To demonstrate how consumption is connected to care, one can examine how Janet, a divorced mother with eight-year-old twins, implemented defensive othering when talking about her twin's classmate:

Their daughter is new to the school this year and [the parents] basically, about once a week, bring in gifts for the entire classroom. I mean, it could just be an eraser and a pencil. They bring cupcakes too. But what's the point of that? It's over the top. They're trying to buy their daughter's way into the hearts of all the kids in the classroom... and I would say in all ways I absolutely do not go down that road. I think it's totally horrid that [the parents are] doing that.

Janet expressed the ways in which parents take advantage of gifts to build relationships and show care; however, in this example, she illustrated how consumption was used to connect one's child with surrounding peers. Janet demonstrated defensive othering by highlighting how others intentionally use objects to enhance relationships, while also emphasizing that she, as a parent, disapproves of such materialistic practices. In other words, Janet is reinforcing the negative stereotype that divorced parents use consumption as a way to strengthen bonds with children, and simultaneously underscoring how that stereotype does not apply to her.

Divorced parents' use of defensive othering covertly acknowledges that consumption is indeed a mechanism that helps connect parents and children. Interviews revealed the cultural belief that divorced parents employ this technique more than married parents. Thus, to counteract the cultural stigma that divorce results in overconsumption or "Santa Claus" parenting, the participants in this research stressed how they were an exception to the divorced parent consumer stereotype via defensive othering.

ii. The Ideal Parent Consumer

In addition to distancing themselves from the "wrong" kind of consumption through defensive othering, parents actively claimed to be ideal consumers. Research contends that people speak in particular ways to achieve desired identities (Buttny 2004). Accordingly, all participants in this study used a specific discourse when talking about consumption that allowed them to appear as what I have termed the *ideal parent*

consumer. This dialogue revealed what divorced parents consider to be exemplary child-rearing consumption practices. Interviewees focused on four primary topics that typify their perception of an ideal parent consumer: first, consume experiences—mainly activities and vacations—that increase the amount of time parents and children spend together; second, consume only what children “need” and put aside “wants” for special occasions; third, consume as a reward for children so that spending is goal-oriented; fourth, permit children to consume through their own personal finances, such as allowances. I discuss each of these topics in turn.

iii. Experiences: Shared Activities and Vacations

One of the most salient themes in divorced parents’ discourse was the importance of *experiential consumption*, which is defined as purchases “made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through” (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003: 1194). In this study, parents used experiential consumption to show that they are model child-rearing consumers in two ways. First, because of the negative stereotypes associated with materialism, children who value experiential consumption reflect favorably on their parents. Second, consuming through activities and events allows parents and children to have shared experiences that are analogous with intensive mothering.

Jessica illustrated these two aspects of experiential consumption through a conversation regarding what her daughter Megan likes to do in her free time:

She has very high expectations of how the weekends are gonna go [laughs], cuz’ we have always just done a lot, and so, you know, staying home around the house for the day is really not an option. So her expectations are more around having fun all the time, which is probably not very good [laughs], umm, but versus getting things. So experiences versus tangible stuff.

Q: So what does Megan do on a typical weekend?

We like to be out of the house [laughs]. I'm not one to stay in the house very much, so [we] go to the movies, go to the zoo, go hiking, go roller-skating, go to OMSI, whatever. Umm, so kind of takin'-the-kid activities that the Portland area has.

Jessica elucidated how Megan values “experiences” over “tangible stuff.”

Furthermore, she articulated the “takin'-the-kid activities” that she and Megan participated in together. Jessica's emphasis on non-materialistic weekend events suggests that experiential consumption is ideal. Her focus on shared activities corresponds with society's image of ideal parent consumers because it exemplifies elements of intensive mothering; in particular, experiential consumption highlights child-centered practices that are laborious and time intensive (Hays 1996).

Interestingly, while Jessica talked about experiential consumption in the form of clear-cut events and activities, other participants explained how they purchased specific objects that enabled parents and children to have shared experiences. For instance, Janet explains how spending money has facilitated bonding time with her twins, Sarah and Stephen:

Spending money on, you know, a new pair of basketball shoes—yeah, cuz' then we can go to the gym and play basketball together and I can coach their basketball team and they have shoes to play with. So I would say that spending money is beneficial [because of] the activity that goes along with it.

For Janet, purchasing athletic equipment allowed her to coach and play with Stephen and Sarah. Significantly, all divorced parents in this study mentioned at least one way in which material items helped actively engage parents and kids. As divorced father Michael noted, “Tyler associates [objects] with enabling him to do this fun thing with other people, like playing video games with me.” Similarly, both Janet and Jessica

highlighted consumption practices that permitted them to dynamically connect with their children as well.

Overall, divorced parents in this study focused on experiential consumption because it underscored the importance of spending *time* with their children. When divorce occurs, the amount of time parents and children spend together typically decreases; as a result, experiential consumption manifests as one way in which divorced parents can engage in quality time with their children. For instance, Nancy demonstrated the impact of divorce on experiential consumption when discussing her ex-husband's spending habits:

Michael used to be so frugal that he wouldn't buy anything for Tyler. But now that Michael has left the house, I see him taking Tyler to the circus, taking him to the mountain to go skiing or to go sledding, or they're going to the beach for three days, just the two of them and they'll hit the aquarium and things like that. So it's more activity oriented, but times 50 compared to what we used to do. He's almost overindulging with activities.

In this excerpt, Nancy indicated how the divorce specifically caused an increase in her ex-husband Michael's activity level. Notably, many parents reported a rise in experiential consumption following the divorce. For instance, as Brian asserted, "I think I bought her more things right after [the divorce] because she was spending half her time here and frankly I enjoyed going shopping with her and being with her." Like Brian, the participants in this study recognized that experiential consumption increased after divorce because it required spending quality time with their children.

Nevertheless, since experiential consumption was such a prevalent theme in divorced parents' discourse, it is important to examine *why* participants felt they needed to emphasize experiential consumption in the first place. Research has found that there is a positive stereotype associated with "experiential" people (Van Boven and Gilovich

2003)—this indicates why experiential consumption is part of the ideal parent consumer image. Due to the cultural contradictions surrounding child-rearing consumption—mainly the dilemma between providing for one’s child and spoiling one’s child—divorced parents emphasized the positive aspects of experiential consumption. Basically, to avoid the label of an over-consuming divorced parent, participants defaulted to the safest discourse, one that clearly illustrates positive consumption practices.

Experiential consumption expands beyond day-to-day activities and includes vacations as well. Every divorced parent interviewed for this research provided at least two examples of different vacations they had taken their child on within the past year. Vacation destinations ranged from nearby camping areas to exotic spots such as Hawaii and Mexico. But regardless of the location, divorced parents shared one outstanding motive for taking family vacations: trips allowed them to spend prolonged time with their children. Thus, *time* is the integral element that attracts divorced parents to consume experientially, via activities and vacations.

Additionally, vacations function as collective experiences that help reinforce the family’s identity (Epp and Price 2008). When divorce occurs, the family unit is typically broken into two parts—the maternal family and the paternal family. Accordingly, all interviewees made a clear distinction between their personal vacation time and their ex-spouses’. When participants talked about experiential consumption in terms of vacation, they drew clear-cut boundaries that indicated which members were included in one’s family following divorce.

In the excerpt below, Tessa articulated the importance of time and also identified the members of her family unit post-divorce in response to a question regarding the ultimate purpose or goal of family vacations:

Umm, I work a huge number of hours and so vacation is about family time—getting to be with Hannah, and my sister and her kids, and doing what they wanna do. Usually our whole vacation revolves around whatever the kids wanna do, so whether it's snorkeling, or shopping, or skiing, it's, you know—being a guilty working mother, it's the time you can just spend [with the kids]. You know, getting to be around them and getting to talk with them about what's going on. Until you spend a lot of time with them, you don't really get the scoop on what's happening.

First, Tessa pointed out that time is the primary reason she values vacations with her daughter, which is reminiscent of Janet's and Jessica's comments about shared activities and experiences. Also, when describing her typical family vacation, Tessa characterized her post-divorce family as consisting of herself, her daughter Hannah, her twin sister and her nieces. Markedly, vacations served the dual purposes of redefining the divorced family and increasing the amount of time divorced parents spent with their children.

Ultimately, divorced parents' discourse centered on shared experiences and vacations because, as previously mentioned, experiential people are positively stereotyped (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). As Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) explain, "because being 'materialistic' is viewed negatively whereas being 'experiential' is viewed positively, telling stories about experiences one has acquired may portray the storyteller in a more favorable light than telling stories about acquired possessions" (p. 1220). Likewise, the ideal parent consumer's discourse emphasized experiential consumption specifically because it counteracted negative stereotypes associated with divorced parent child-rearing consumption. Accordingly, participants' interviews indicate that experiential spending constitutes ideal consumption.

The next three sections evoke the ideal parent consumer image as parents attempt to restrain their children's consumption. As a result of conflicting cultural ideals regarding

child-rearing consumption, divorced parents accentuated *symbolic deprivation*, which Pugh (2009) defines as moments when parents “point to particularly meaningful goods or experiences that their child [does] not have as evidence of their own moral restraint and worthiness as parents” (p. 9). Divorced parents tried to look like ideal parent consumers by drawing attention to the ways in which they refused or denied their children’s material desires. As the following three segments show, however, symbolic deprivation does not successfully control consumption, but rather postpones purchases for later.

iv. Needs versus Wants

Society holds particularly negative views towards spoiled children and over-consumption (Pugh 2009). To appear as ideal parent consumers, many divorced parents alleged that they predominantly consume *necessities* for their children and put aside other consumer desires for special occasions. Michael exemplified this idea when he described how he regulated his son Tyler’s consumption:

I always go back to what my mom said—there’s a difference between *want* and *need*.

Q: So how do you say “no” when Tyler wants something?

I go back to that. I’m like, “Do you *want* it or do you *need* it?” I say, “Do you need it?” and he goes, “No, I don’t need it, but I want it.” And I say, “Well, that’s a difference.” I try to explain to him the difference between want and need. Does he really need another video game? No.

Through his discourse, Michael explicitly explained how his child-rearing consumption practices revolve around what Tyler “needs.” Divorced parents understand that they avoid being negatively stereotyped when they focus on necessity-based consumption because society *expects* parents to give the most basic provisions for their children. By focusing on children’s “needs,” divorced parents demonstrated symbolic

deprivation by emphasizing their refusal to succumb to their children's materialistic wishes, thus portraying themselves as ideal parent consumers.

For this reason, the divorced parents in this study also claimed that they save their child's "wants" for special occasions, mainly Christmas and birthdays. As noted by Pugh (2009), symbolic deprivation allows parents to appear as if they are saying "no" to their children's consumer desires when in reality they are merely delaying consumption for instances when they believe indulgence is culturally appropriate. The following excerpts demonstrate how needs, wants, and special occasions are tied together and implemented in divorced parents' discourse:

We're always going to fund the need. We try to take the wants and put them around a special event—Christmas, birthday, special events, etcetera.

...

Umm, you know, I really try and just buy, like, major things on her birthday and Christmas.

...

Typically the big things he's talked about before and we've decided like, all right, it's a "want" and we're gonna tie it to a special occasion, so when he gets it he's been waiting for it for some time.

...

For big items I generally will say, "Yeah, you better put that on your Christmas lists." You know, there needs to be some sort of purpose. I don't buy, you know, a hundred dollar something for them just because. We just don't do that.

Centering on special occasions allows parents to candidly talk about their consumption in a socially acceptable context. Plus, the events that divorced parents mentioned correspond with society's expectation about when parents should over-consume. Accordingly, participants used special occasions as excuses for extravagant consumption.

But interestingly, not all divorced parents were able to successfully balance the cultural ideals of child-rearing consumption in their discourse. For some participants, the division between “needs” and “wants” seemed blurrier. Brian illustrated this confusion in response to a question regarding what he bought Hannah for Christmas:

Well, I usually just give her gift cards now. I bought her basketball shoes, but I bought her gift cards so she can go shopping for herself. I’ve bought her jewelry, earrings. I’ve bought her necklaces. I used to buy all her clothes practically for about the first four years we were divorced. Uh, I buy nice jeans for her and things like that—things that she needs.

Brian attempted to defend his consumption practices by accentuating “things that [Hannah] needs,” but falls short of portraying symbolic deprivation because society generally considers items like earrings and necklaces “wants” rather than “needs.” In this example, Brian deviated from the cultural script of ideal child-rearing consumerism and, as a result, was more likely to be negatively labeled as an over-consuming divorced parent by others.

Participants’ talk of “needs” verses “wants” parallels society’s belief that parents should provide for, but not spoil, children, with the exception of consumer-centered holidays. Hence, when divorced parents pledge “needs” over “wants,” they are reproducing culturally acceptable ideals with the hope of being positively regarded as proper consumers. In sum, divorced parents balanced conflicting cultural ideals in their discourse by alleging to limit child-rearing consumption to necessities and only spoiling children when it is culturally appropriate, rendering them ideal parent consumers.

v. Rewards and Goals

The second way divorced parents employ symbolic deprivation is through rewards and goal-oriented spending. Participants justify consumption by stressing the ways in

which children *earned* and *deserved* material items. In this study, parents typically utilized rewards as incentives for academic achievement. For example, as Nancy and Tessa explained:

He has been studying and learning how to read, and it's very difficult for him. It's not something—math has been simple, reading not so much. So if he gets 100% on his spelling tests, sometimes I'll say, "You've earned a treat. Why don't we go pick it out?" So, it's kind of based on positive behaviors.

...

I try to set goals for something that she really wants. So, for example, she really wanted Gmail and I didn't think that, you know, she needed it—she had to get all As. Or she wanted to get the new iPhone and I told her I wasn't gonna give her an iPhone, she [could] have her old phone, so she had to get straight As in order to get the iPhone.

These rewards imply that parents have established rules and are in control of their child's consumption practices. As Pugh (2009) points out, this frees parents from having to say "yes" or "no" to children's requests; consequently, the power to consume has been placed on the child and he or she is responsible for attaining personal rewards. Nevertheless, rewards and goals do not control consumption practices; instead, this approach just delays consumption. Simply put, Tessa's and Nancy's children did acquire "treats," Gmail, and an iPhone, but only after getting good grades.

Alternatively, some participants consumed first with the hope that their children would then display good behaviors accordingly. In these cases, parents tended to stress rules and guidelines that justified consumption. For example, at one point during Tessa's interview she described how she recently revamped Hannah's entire bedroom with "all new Pottery Barn stuff," expanded closets, and a gigantic vanity for her bathroom. Then later, when Tessa explained how she regulates Hannah's consumption, she referred to the remodeled bedroom and stated:

So, I do, honestly, eventually cave on getting her something, but it's usually with some goal in mind. Like redoing her room, she has to keep her room clean. But today she's going to a Jesuit basketball game and I said, "If I come home and your room is not clean you will lose your phone for a week." There has to be some accountability and responsibility for, you know, what she wants.

In this instance, Tessa begins by admitting that she "eventually cave[s]" and consumes for Hannah, which confirms the assertion that in time children will benefit materially from reward-based consumerism. In an attempt to appear as an ideal parent consumer, Tessa compensated for consumption by articulating the rules and consequences of Hannah's new bedroom. As Tessa noted, these rules force Hannah to have "some accountability and responsibility" for her material gains. In addition, such rules also seem to bolster the belief that children earned the rewards, which reinforces the notion that consumption was out of the parents' control and therefore parents were not liable for consuming.

In this study, divorced parents used rewards and goal-oriented consumption to validate spending practices. By creating rules that appear to control and restrain consumption, participants believe they remain neutral and unaccountable for children's spending. Goals and rewards permit parents to seem as if as if they are restraining consumption when in reality they are sponsoring it.

vi. Allowances

Divorced parents often draw upon children's personal finances or allowances to rationalize spending. For instance, in response to a question concerning how parents say "no" to children's material requests, Nancy remarked that her six-year-old son Tyler "has

his own money. He has several hundred dollars he's put away into a bank account and I always remind him he can use his own money for something he wants." Here, Nancy demonstrated how Tyler's money enables him to make his own consumption choices, conveniently removing any parental accountability. Yet, Nancy never mentioned where her kindergartner obtained "several hundred dollars."

Similarly, participants often referred to children's own finances in their discourse, but were unable to explain where said money came from if they did not allocate a fixed allowance. Tessa demonstrated this in a conversation regarding the source of Hannah's money:

Q: So where does Hannah get her own money from?

She, honestly, she doesn't really have a lot of money. She gets gift cards and she gets money for birthdays and Christmas, but I do not give her an allowance. And, honestly, I don't think kids should have a lot of money because, you know, she makes sort of poor choices. And she's really good with her money. She's got a lot—she's a saver. And she's also very good about spending it...She's very responsible with money, if she does have money.

Without the excuse of an allowance, Tessa was put in the hot seat. She was unable to explain Hannah's funds coherently and as a result lapsed into a contradictory discourse. By the end of Tessa's statement it is still unclear where Hannah gets her money, how much capital she has, and how responsible she is with her finances. By not identifying the source of Hannah's wealth, Tessa deviated from the ideal parent consumer discourse and was unable to illustrate any form of symbolic deprivation, which made Tessa accountable for all spending.

Conversely, other parents were able to simply use allowance as a scapegoat for their children's consumption. As divorced mothers Jessica and Erica explained:

Usually Megan has to use her own allowance if it's not, you know, something that is planned to purchase. Like, yesterday we were at Target and she wanted to use her week's allowance on four separate lip-glosses...So, she bought two, but she's still thinkin' about those other two lip-glosses that she'd like to buy.

...

I do an allowance. It's a dollar for every year old Emma is and it's not—I don't connect it to chores, but she has to do chores no matter what and she always gets her allowance. Right now she's wanting to get her room redone and a comforter and new curtains and stuff in her room at my house and so she's actually promised or pledged three months of her allowance plus she had \$20 from a gift that she gave to me that goes towards her remodel of her room or makeover.

The mere existence of an allowance made it easy for Jessica to rationalize spending money on lip-gloss and allowed Erica to justify redecorating Emma's bedroom. Like rewards, allowances eliminated parents' responsibility to monitor child consumption. Participants used allowances and children's personal funds as a form of symbolic deprivation because it is viewed as curbing child consumption, not reinforcing it. Divorced parents projected the image of an ideal parent consumer by emphasizing consumer restraint and falling back on the pat line, "they can buy it with their own money," to explain any unwarranted consumption.

In the end, Ideal Consumption attempts to debunk the negative stereotypes associated with divorced child-rearing consumption by depicting parents as model consumers. Experiential consumption allows parents to consume in ways that increase the amount of time parents spend with their children. In addition, divorced parents use needs versus wants, rewards and goals, and allowances as techniques to control their children's spending, albeit unsuccessfully. Overall, divorced parents, like all parents, consume materially and experientially; however, because of the negative stereotypes associated with such practices as "Santa Claus" parenting, divorced parents try to

counteract negative images by appearing as ideal consumers. Given that the ideal consumer discourse does not directly address divorce, a second strand of talk emerged as parents explained divorce-specific influences on consumption.

B. Realistic Consumption

In contrast to the Ideal Consumer discourse, which participants used to deflect the stigma attached to being a divorced parent, participants also explained the ways in which divorce affects child-rearing consumption by discussing realistic spending dilemmas. In this section, I discuss three issues specific to divorced parents. First, I report on the gendered aspects of parents' post-divorce capital and underscore the importance of the mother's employment status. Second, I touch on three logistical predicaments that typically boost spending. Finally, I explain how feelings of guilt and shame influence child-rearing consumption practices.

i. Finances

Gender affected the finances of the divorced parents in this study. All fathers were employed, possessed substantial amounts of wealth, and were secondary caregivers to children. These divorced fathers correlated with the traditionalist perspective, wherein breadwinning is men's primary duty. In this research, divorced fathers' capital was stable and taken for granted. Conversely, divorced mothers reflected more contemporary roles. All mothers in this research maintained full- or part-time income-producing jobs and were primary caregivers to their children. The following section discusses divorced mothers' part- and full-time work and then focuses on the ways in which money can

become problematic post-divorce. Notably, because interview questions did not pry into participants' finances, these findings reveal *who* consumes for children.

Divorced mothers stressed the importance of paid work because it gave them financial independence from ex-husbands. Still, in addition to being employed, women in this study were also responsible for the majority of childcare. Stone (2007) asserts that U.S. society pressures mothers to choose between the incompatible options of being an *ideal mother* or an *ideal worker*. The ideal mother abides by the cultural mandates of intensive mothering, while the ideal worker is "unencumbered by family, care-giving, or other demands, and hence able to devote himself without distraction or interruption to his employer" (Stone 2007: 82-83).

In addition, Stone (2007) argues that these two ideals create a double bind that pressures mothers to make the "socially acceptable" choice and stay at home with children full-time (p. 128). However, divorced mothers do not always have this option. In this study, mothers frequently articulated how they upheld both the ideal worker and ideal mother models, but finances differed considerably for those who were employed part-time. As Erica explained:

Before I married I was the breadwinner. Plus while we were married until I had our child I made triple what I make now and umm, you know, I took years off to be home, so it totally cramped up my career, of course. But she's my priority now.

Erica described how becoming a mother stunted her career trajectory. The incongruence of the ideal worker and ideal mother compelled Erica to stay at home with Emma. Nonetheless, although the divorce obligated Erica to return to work part-time, she still asserted that Emma was her number one priority. Erica illustrated how mothers who work part-time typically identify with the ideal mother paradigm (Stone 2007). But the

decision to put careers on hold has substantial financial consequences, especially for divorced mothers. As Erica noted, her income was reduced three-fold.

Although, divorced parents often divide childcare expenses in accordance with each person's earnings, divorced mothers who are unable to split the costs tend to compensate by providing the bulk of childcare. As Erica continued to describe her post-divorce finances, she stated:

Well, money makes me feel kind of inadequate sometimes because she knows that her Dad—in fact, I don't make any qualms about it—but he spends more. It's his money that puts her through school. I mean, we did negotiate that I get a lot less child support because he's completely paying for her school and college. I do all the volunteer work—there's a minimum of 25 hours you have to do at the school—I do that. I am the one that works out all the schedule issues—all the afterschool, all the breaks, all the summer breaks. I do all the footwork for everything and he essentially pays for most things. During the summer he pays 70 and I pay 30. Umm, but, she knows that he's—he's the money. And there are times that she'll say something like, "Well, Daddy paid for all that," or something like that. And I'm like, "I know that, but he wouldn't have paid for it if he didn't know about it and if I hadn't [told him]." There are times when I get a little, umm, defensive about it.

Interestingly, Erica's labor corresponds with the ideals of intensive mothering and even includes *invisible labor*, which is the unrecognized work that mothers perform in order for families to function, or what Erica called "footwork" (Hochschild 1983). In this excerpt, Erica underscored all the elements that made her an ideal mother, such as volunteering and organizing her daughter's schedule. However, she also noted the importance of money and sometimes felt inadequate compared to her wealthy ex-husband. Although Erica worked part-time and performed almost all childcare duties, her daughter still emphasized the things Erica could not afford. This demonstrates how *divorced mothers are expected to be ideal workers and ideal mothers*. Erica shows how

some divorced women try to balance these two ideals by working part-time and caring for children.

Yet, part-time employment generates low earnings, so often fathers retain child-rearing consumption power. For instance, in her interview Erica mentioned how she obtained permission from her ex-husband to buy Emma a laptop, bicycle, and cell phone, since she could not pay for such items herself. In this study, mothers who worked part-time stressed their care-giving role and largely relied on their ex-husbands' funding for consumption on behalf of their children.

In contrast, mothers who worked full-time were financially independent and rarely spoke of their ex-spouses' money. Unlike part-time workers, these mothers prioritized the ideal worker and tended to rely on other resources such as babysitters and housekeepers to accomplish domestic duties. Notably, these participants could afford to pay others to complete household obligations, which meant more energy could be devoted toward being an ideal worker.

Full-time working mothers were especially pleased with their monetary success because it gave them complete financial independence from their ex-husbands. For example:

I guess that I'm proud that I can still give her the lifestyle that she had before we got divorced. So I kept the house that we were in before the divorce and I haven't cut back on what she gets for Christmas or how her birthday parties are planned or family vacations. So, I think that—I guess it takes on meaning that I don't need my ex-husband to be able to provide for Megan and the lifestyle that we had already given to her.

Jessica showed the satisfaction divorced mothers get from financial security while affirming that full-time employment permitted her to not “cut back” on child-rearing consumption. Rather than checking in with ex-spouses, full-time working mothers

consumed independently. Still, in their interviews, these participants worried about a lack of time with their children because of job obligations and divorced living arrangements.

Tessa explained how she compensated for working fifty hours per week:

You probably have less conversations [with children] I think being a working mother [and] being a divorced working mother. It's like, when I come home we do dinner at the table. There's no TV. Even if we get dinner to go we set the table, we light candles, we sit down, and we even still put it on a plate, because it's that time. That time is really important to me. I think that it's just the appreciation of how limited that time is.

Tessa made up for being an ideal worker by enforcing family dinners. Although participants generally paid others to perform domestic duties, Tessa highlighted the ways in which working divorced mothers attempt to execute ideal mothering. Ultimately, female participants illustrate how divorced mothers balance being ideal workers and mothers, and the financial repercussions that go along with those decisions.

In most cases, regardless of the mother's earnings, both divorced parents are expected to provide for their children, albeit to varying degrees. Participants commonly noted that money becomes a source of conflict when it involves non-necessity consumption. All parents were willing to pay for their children's basics, but discerning who should pay for supplementary items was more complicated. As Janet explained:

The only thing that's a little bit of conflict is, you know, who's in charge of buying something they need? Not everyday things, but if they need soccer uniforms and soccer cleats or whatever, should I pay for that or should he pay for that? Umm, and we haven't really figured out necessarily a system, but I did say when he [moved] back [to Portland] that because he had the kids more, like closer to 50% of the time and child support reflected that, that in my opinion he needed to then pay for closer to 50% of the stuff. Again, not the food that they live on everyday and all their clothes and all that stuff, but the extra stuff on top of that. So, that seems to be sort of going okay, but I still pick up probably 75 percent of the things for them. And that's okay, its not like I keep a running tally of it, but it's an issue for us.

In this instance, Janet avowed that her ex-husband should pay for more because Sarah and Stephen spent additional time at their father's house. Janet exemplified how financial conflicts arise around auxiliary items, such as sports uniforms. Other participants expressed similar sentiments and were uncertain about how consumption should be divided between parents, with the exception of part-time working mothers who asserted that spending was the father's responsibility. Additionally, although Janet believed their children's costs should be split evenly, she still continued to pay for 75 percent of Stephen's and Sarah's consumption. This corresponds with research that has shown a larger proportion of the mother's income gets allocated to children's expenses than the father's (Coontz 1997). This finding may be exacerbated in divorce since women usually retain primary custody, making divorced mothers' finances even more pertinent.

The financial dilemmas divorced parents face disadvantage mothers. In this study, mothers accentuated the importance of employment because it provided independent income. Nonetheless, those who worked part-time could not afford all expenses, so often mothers relied on ex-husbands' capital to fund child-rearing consumption. Alternatively, mothers who worked full-time appreciated their financial independence and consumed liberally. All mothers, however, expressed that the division of spending was inequitable because of their greater investment in their children's day-to-day lives, with a particular emphasis on invisible labor. In addition, controversies arose because mothers felt they spent and consumed more for children, with a focus on non-essential items. Thus, discussions of finances show *who* consumes for children post-divorce and in what contexts. The next section highlights the logistical issues related to child-rearing consumption.

ii. Logistics

Participants identified three logistical dilemmas that divorced parents typically confront. First, divorce requires at least one parent to move into a *new household*. Second, because children transition between both parents' homes, items such as *cell phones* are needed to help parents and children stay in contact. Third, *stepfamilies* and cohabitation urge parents to consume as a way to help children assimilate to new family dynamics. All three of these dilemmas stem from the complex logistics of post-divorce living arrangements.

During their interviews, participants frequently discussed the impact divorce had on *housing*. Customarily, divorce forces at least one person to find new living arrangements, but house hunting as a divorced parent presents unique challenges. All participants who invested in new housing as a result of the divorce shared the common goal of ensuring their new homes were *child-centered*. For example, Michael, who was currently looking for a new residence, exemplified how children influenced housing decisions when he described the necessary requirements of his soon-to-be home with Tyler.

Again, my next goal is really finding the environment and building the environment that Tyler is gonna like and thrive in. Right? So there are requirements there that are like, he needs to be close. Umm, you know, we're not gonna keep the houses 20 miles apart. We're gonna be hopefully within, if not the same neighborhood, at least within two or three miles of each other. I'll probably do a bunk bed so [Tyler] can have friends over. Right?

Michael made it very clear that his new house needed to be located close to Nancy's. Thus divorce can impact where one lives geographically; divorced parents who plan to continue to co-parent must learn to function as separate entities while still

revolving their lives around a shared child. Additionally, Michael acknowledged a second way that Tyler influenced his consumption when he alleged that he would “probably do a bunk bed” for Tyler and his friends. Many participants made similar statements when explaining why they bought particular homes. Appealing to one’s child and his or her friends was of great importance to these divorced parents. Tessa confirmed this notion when recounting why she purchased her present house:

Well, I mean honestly like even the house that I have—I bought the house six years ago right after I got the divorce because I wanted to have the swimming pool and I wanted to have the bigger house where Hannah could have her friends over. So that was the critical reason for me moving and me getting that house was not for myself, but really for her...I guess I always want her to have the house where the kids want to go to—to be comfortable coming to and wanting to hang out, cuz’ I’ve only got her every other weekend so I wanted her friends to want to come to us versus her wanting to go to her friends so I can spend more time with her.

Tessa noted that having Hannah only every other weekend compelled her to consume in a way that guaranteed Hannah would enjoy Tessa’s home. Moreover, Tessa demonstrated how she sought a bigger house with a swimming pool specifically because it allured Hannah and her friends. This shows how divorce can cause parents to consume more than basic necessities in order to own a kid-friendly home. Other participants expressed similar sentiments. As Jessica contended, “I’m the cool Mom with the cool house, so everyone wants to come over [laughs].” Moreover, Tessa explained:

Brian has a townhouse and he’s not comfortable having friends stay the night...Hannah’s whole life now is social and she wants to have her friends over. So now in the last nine months I think she’s spent two nights with dad, so she pretty much lives with me all the time.

Here, Tessa expressed the benefits of having a child-centered household. During their interviews, both Brian and Tessa candidly stated that Hannah preferred to stay at Tessa’s house full time because it better accommodated her and her friends. This

underscores why participants desired homes that appealed to their children. Divorced parents understand that consuming in particular ways—such as having a bunk bed or swimming pool—can potentially increase the amount of time children spend at that house. Furthermore, the divorced parents in this study did not want to be put in Brian’s position. As Brian admitted, “I frankly would like it if [Hannah] were here more so I could watch her and help her with her homework and things like that, which I used to do for years. But, it became difficult with the divorce.”

Of course, this does not imply that consumption practices completely determine which parent a child prefers living with, but parental concern about children’s preferences nonetheless shapes their consumption. The participants in this research illustrated how being a divorced parent may lead to supplementary consumption in order to appeal to children. Stories like Tessa’s and Brian’s provided an *extreme* example of what can occur when one parent possesses a child-centered home and the other does not, confirming divorced parents’ belief that household consumption influences where children desire to reside, even if children’s preferences are actually shaped by more complex dynamics. In most cases, participants described smaller items—such as their children’s favorite books and television channels—that they purchased when moving into new houses. Overall, these parents established that divorce increases consumption by highlighting the importance of homes that appeal to children.

In addition to large-scale purchase decisions such as housing, participants also acknowledged divorce’s influence on consumption in more fundamental ways. In this study, all families—with the exception of Nancy and Brian¹—purchased *cell phones* for

¹ Nancy and Brian had the youngest child in this study. Given that Tyler is 6 years old, a cell phone is not age appropriate. This may explain why they were the only participants who did not purchase a cell phone.

their children due to post-divorce living arrangements. Notably, children's personal phones were the most commonly cited example of divorce-related consumption in this study, and every parent mentioned them as necessary but atypical spending.

Interestingly, mothers alone pushed cell phone purchases. As Erica reported, "It's funny cuz' [Emma] wasn't really pushing for [a cell phone] as much as I identified that we needed it." Similarly, other mothers felt children "needed" phones because of dual-home living arrangements. For example, Janet explained that she purchased a cell phone for her twins, Stephen and Sarah, because she was unable to communicate with them when they stayed at their father's house.

I got them a cell phone, actually. Just that they take to their Dad's so that they can connect with me. They actually know how to text. *Totally* against cell phones for kids this age. *Absolutely* against it. But, they carry it nowhere except to their Dad's and then they bring it home. It's not like they walk around with it at school or whatever.

Like Janet, mothers who bought cell phones justified doing so only because of insufficient communication with their children. Yet, Janet followed her initial comments by affirming that normally eight-year-olds should not have cell phones, thus blaming the divorce for her consumption. To validate her consumption practices, Janet described an incident that occurred the weekend before her interview:

Their father watches football games with Stephen. Well, Sarah doesn't want to do that. So, the emotions that came up last weekend were sobbing phone calls, "I don't wanna be here. I wanna come home." It's awful. What do you do with that? I *want* to be neutral and fair and say, "Stay at your Dad's. That's what you should do." But, I mean, these were just repetitive and she sounded awful. And so, actually the two of us agreed that she should come home for just a brief period just to kind of hang out with me. She's not used to being away from me for five or six days.

Significantly, Sarah used her cell phone to contact Janet when she was emotionally distressed at her father's house. This story epitomizes why divorced mothers feel it is

imperative to provide children with cell phones—the phone allowed Sarah to access Janet during a crisis. Although Janet’s narrative depicted an uncommon occurrence, it functions as a cautionary tale that demonstrates what can happen if the children of divorced parents don’t have cell phones. Mothers often expressed frustration over fathers’ failure to recognize the importance of these concerns. As Amanda stated:

He didn’t think she needed the phone. He doesn’t have a home phone, just a cell phone. I mean, I talk to her every single day and so when she was at his house for the whole weekend or every Tuesday I wouldn’t always be able to get through to her. Or I would leave him three messages and then he wouldn’t give her the phone, or she wouldn’t call me back. He wasn’t happy about her getting a phone and didn’t think it was appropriate and that, you know, blah blah blah blah blah. But I *have* to be able to talk to her whenever I can because I travel a lot for work. So I said, “I need to be able to talk to my daughter. And I’m sorry, I realize you don’t understand because you don’t have that need for communication, but she needs to hear from me.”

Amanda contends her ex-husband does not feel any need for communication, corresponding with other mothers’ claims. Fathers also concurred with this assertion, such as Brian, who stated, “Hannah’s mother got her an iPhone and I would *not* have done that. I didn’t see the point.” Intriguingly, cell phones mark the only discernible difference between the consumption practices of mothers and fathers in these interviews. This gendered finding could correspond with traditional differences in the family roles of mothers and fathers; mothers may be more likely to buy children cell phones because it facilitates intensive mothering. In particular, cell phones allow constant access to children, meaning divorced mothers can engage in intensive mothering even when they are physically absent. Amanda also exemplifies how changes in technology, namely not having a home phone, shape consumption in contemporary divorce contexts.

Custody decisions and inflexible schedules frequently force divorced parents and their children to spend time apart. To mend a perceived lack of time and communication,

divorced parents turn to cell phones as a way to connect with their children. Also, equipping children with their own phones allows kids to contact parents in an emergency or emotional crisis, such as Sarah did. Accordingly, mothers' focus on the need for cell phones illustrated the second way in which the logistics of divorce provoke child-rearing consumption.

A third dilemma that participants discussed concerned *stepfamilies* and cohabitation. Today in the U.S., stepfamilies are more prevalent than ever (Gubrium and Holstein 2006). Yet cultural ideas regarding how stepfamilies should behave and function are much more ambiguous than mainstream family ideals (Marsiglio and Hinojosa 1995). Leo, who has four children from three marriages, affirms that, "It took awhile for my kids to get used to each other and to [my wife] Kara. It took awhile for everyone to adjust." Like Leo, all participants who had been divorced for more than two years shared various stories about dating and cohabitating. For instance, Jessica's current boyfriend and his two daughters—Allison and Marisa—were preparing to move in with Jessica and Megan at the time of her interview. In the following excerpt, Jessica explained how she used material items to get all three daughters excited about the big move:

I just redid Megan's room, uh, this week. She got a new comforter, and rugs, and curtains, and she'll get new pictures, and we'll paint her room and all that. So, she's gettin' a room makeover and that basically is to make her feel more excited about the other girls moving into the house cuz' they're gettin' new furniture too, and so we're kind of letting all the girls redo their rooms to make it feel like it's new and it's our house as a family.

Jessica redecorated and consumed in an effort to make Megan, Allison, and Marisa eager to live together. In this example, she intentionally used consumption to generate feelings of belongingness and family unity. Notably, because stepfamilies generate unfamiliar family dynamics for all members, consumption can be employed as a way to

make transitions easier for children (Marsiglio and Hinojosa 1995). Jessica hoped that redoing Megan's bedroom to make it new like Allison and Marisa's room would make all three children feel better about sharing a house. Nonetheless, Jessica consumed more than just bedroom materials to prepare for cohabitation:

Now that we have Allison and Marisa—my boyfriend's daughters—joining us, I'm influencing his purchasing choices for Christmas based on what they need to fit into the neighborhood. So, umm, they got razor scooters and then he's getting his girls bicycles for Christmas. So basically we're doing this so they all can fit into the cul-de-sac and when the other kids grab their bikes and scooters our girls will be able to join in. So I'm buying now for somebody else's children [laughs].

Here, she contended that Allison and Marisa needed specific items like bikes and scooters to "fit in" with Megan and neighborhood friends. Again, Jessica demonstrated how consumption could be employed to help children adapt to novel divorce-related situations.

Similarly, other participants used consumption in this fashion when acquainting children with their boyfriend or girlfriend. Divorced parents' use of consumption under such circumstances reflects the understanding that stepfamilies can either be strong and healthy or dysfunctional, although most fall somewhere between those two extremes (Marsiglio and Hinojosa 1995). In particular, divorced parents try to avoid creating dysfunctional stepfamilies because of the impact on their children. For instance, Brian recounted the unfortunate effects that Tessa and her third husband Kurt's marriage had on Hannah:

[During therapy] Hannah said to the counselor, "I don't want Kurt living with us." That's the person Tessa moved in with 30 days after she decided she wanted a divorce...Anyways, Tessa went home and told Kurt that Hannah had said that, so Kurt cornered Hannah in the house and said, "Look, young lady, I'm not leaving! And you can't make me leave so you'd better get used to it!" That *really* hurt Hannah's feelings and we had some bad moments.

This event is one example of why divorced parents have reservations and fears regarding stepfamilies. In addition to deeply upsetting Hannah, this incident resulted in Tessa's second divorce. As she explained, "I just kept thinking, like oh my God, I did it to Hannah *again*. And I know it really hurts her and I feel *horrible* about it." As Tessa demonstrated, stepfamilies seem risky because they make parents and children susceptible to another divorce. This coordinates with existing data that maintains that individuals who remarry are more likely to get divorced again (Cherlin 2009).

In this study, many participants shared stepfamily horror stories like Brian's, although not everyone had personal experiences with these scenarios. Such incidents caused divorced parents to be extremely conscious of the impact romantic relationships have on their children. Consequently, some divorced parents, like Jessica, purposefully bought items to improve their children's experiences within stepfamilies.

Although Jessica affirmed that Allison and Marisa would benefit from toys such as bicycles and scooters, given the neighborhood, her consumption practices indicated the belief that children get pleasure from material gains. Specifically, Jessica appeared to understand that providing new playthings and redecorating bedrooms made adolescent girls very happy and she expected that this might result in positive attitudes towards the new family formation. Jessica's consumption illustrates how being a divorced parent can result in added expenses when assimilating children to a new family.

Parents consistently drew upon these three aspects of post-divorce logistics—child-centered homes, cell phones, and stepfamilies—to clarify and justify divorce's influence on consumption. Ultimately, all three logistical dilemmas predominantly increase parents' child-rearing consumption. In the following section, participants'

emotions are examined to further explain divorced parents' child-rearing consumption practices.

iii. Emotions

Participants displayed a wide range of emotions regarding divorce; however, *guilt* was the most prominent emotion in this research. The perceived repercussions of divorce on their children caused continuous feelings of guilt, which impacted consumption in various ways. Additionally, participants often referred to a distinct set of *worries* and *shameful* emotions that manifested during the *first year*² of divorce. The rest of this section focuses on emotions during the early stages of divorce and then addresses divorced parents' guilt.

To understand divorced parents' emotions, one must be familiar with the sociological perspective on identities. Sociologists assert that a person's self-concept is comprised of multiple identities. Recently, researchers argue that individuals contain *moral identities*, which they classify as a person's most supreme and salient identities (Stets and Turner 2006). A moral identity helps guide behavior and distinguishes between good and bad conduct (Stets and Turner 2006). Importantly, "when there is a discrepancy between the meanings of the moral identity and the meanings implied by individuals' conduct, negative moral emotions emerge" (Stets and Turner 2006: 548). In this research, participants' moral identities were mother/father and husband/wife; yet,

² I estimate these worries last for approximately one year because such concerns seemed to dissipate with more divorce experience. For example, multiple participants mentioned how their *first* holiday season as a divorced parent was especially difficult. Accordingly, one year is a time frame that encompasses most "first" post-divorce experiences. Additionally, feelings of shame seemed to disappear as parents adjusted to their new roles.

these roles are incongruent with the decision to divorce, thus resulting in negative moral emotions. In particular, participants exhibited *self-critical moral emotions*, which are defined as the “negative emotions of [shame and guilt] directed at self for violating moral codes” (Stets and Turner 2006: 550).

The moral emotion of *shame* is a self-critical emotion that “attacks a person’s role identity” (Stets and Turner 2006: 551). In this study, shame was evident when parents discussed their failures to achieve traditional moral identities. Michael and Nancy—the two participants who had just begun the divorce process at the time of their interviews—were the only interviewees who expressed existing feelings of shame. For example, Michael articulated shameful emotions and guilt regarding his new role as a divorced parent:

Oh, you know, I’ve gone through everything. You know, five, six months ago it was failure. [Pause] I failed. I failed Tyler. I failed myself. Right? Then there’s the emotional hatred area, I mean, you go through all of that. And you know, you always as a parent assume he’ll stay up at night and think of bad things and you’re like, “Is this something that I’ve done?” You’re always gonna have that guilt. Not to mention I’m Catholic so I have even more guilt, right?

For Michael, taking on the role of a divorced parent resulted in feelings of “emotional hatred,” failure, and guilt. In particular, he was ashamed that he had failed to accomplish the ideal roles of father and husband. Significantly, shame disappeared as participants adapted to their new roles as *divorced parents*. Participants who had been divorced for longer than a year did not experience shameful feelings. Erica explained how shameful emotions dissipated when she recalled Emma’s initial reaction to the divorce:

When I was like the first parent in her class to get a divorce it was like, “Oh my God my parents are divorced!” and it was really awful for her. I was kind of embarrassed. Now there’s a whole bunch of people divorced so it’s no big deal.

Erica remarked that divorce became “no big deal” once proximate parents in Emma’s class began breaking up as well. This shows how divorced parents’ shame fades as surrounding others fail to achieve the traditional roles of mother/father and wife/husband. As Michael alleged, “You gotta find the right space and realize it’s gonna be fine. [Divorce] happens to a lot of people and there’s a good and bad way to do it. So you make a logical and conscious choice to be good at it.” In this quote, Michael acknowledged that divorce “happens to a lot of people,” but he also admitted that personally he had made a “logical and conscious choice to be good” at divorced parenting. This illustrates how shameful feelings disappeared as participants adapted to independent parenting and took on the moral identity of a divorced parent. Ultimately, parents’ shame vanished as they became accustom to their divorced roles, and as other divorced parents became more visible to them.

Interestingly, feelings of shame coincide with worries that also become evident during the first year of divorce. Shame results in internal self-evaluations (Turner 2007). In the context of divorce, shame caused participants to evaluate their failure as a model mother/father or wife/husband. These self-evaluations resulted in a distinct set of *worries* that highlighted parents’ self-doubt regarding their ability to fulfill the role of divorced parent and handle the effects of divorce on their children. The excerpts below come from Nancy’s interview and exemplify the pervasive worries that parents experience during the early stages of divorce:

I think I’m trying to make [the divorce] as calm as possible, and so far, so good. But I guess I’m just kind of aware that a negative could and probably will show up and it’s—it’s like walking on eggshells waiting for it. And then how will I handle it? Will I have the tools or the strength that day? Or will I lose it? You know what I mean?

...

I do think I'm hypersensitive. I think I'm constantly listening. I think I am waiting for the bomb to drop, but it just hasn't yet. I'm waiting for that moment where he goes, "But I don't want Dad to get a new house." You know, like, I have this feeling when he finds out that there's another house that he gets to stay at he might be excited about it, but maybe he'll say, "Well, why can't we all live at..." When he says, "why can't we all live at the same house?" that's when it's going to get harder.

...

The only thing that kind of touched my emotion bone the other night was when I was asleep, and he never wakes up in the middle of the night, and I heard him wake up and yell out the door, "Dad? Mom? Anybody?" And it just kind of sounded like he felt alone, and you know, I went and helped him, but that did kind of bother me because his dad wasn't there, it was just me. But, he's never done that before so for him to do that now I kind of wonder like, "Oh, God, did I just create this?"

Nancy's remarks typify the worries that emerge as parents anticipate the consequences of divorce. Previous research has found that worrying is a strategy used to manage uncomfortable anticipatory feelings about the unknown (Lois 2003). In this case, Nancy worried in order to control her emotions regarding the unpredictable outcomes of divorce and her ability to be a successful divorced parent. Other participants also recounted similar concerns when they recalled the beginnings of divorce. For instance, Brian said, "I went to a counselor right after [the divorce] just because I wanted to make sure that I wasn't a big jerk? Okay." Here, Brian soothed his self-doubts by seeking advice from a professional. Essentially, Nancy's quotations illustrate early divorced-based worries while Brian confirms that other divorced parents also experience such emotions during the first year.

For this research, initial worries were significant because parents recognized a change in child-rearing consumption during this time. In general, participants acknowledged an increase in spending immediately after the divorce and throughout the first 12 months. This notion corresponds to findings in the Ideal Consumer section,

wherein parents confirmed a rise in experiential consumption once they divorced. As Brian admitted, “I think I bought her more things right afterwards because she was spending half her time here and frankly I enjoyed going shopping with her.”

In the Ideal Consumer section, this quote illustrates how divorce increased parents’ desire to consume experientially in order to spend time with their children. But, in addition to allowing Brian and Hannah to have shared experiences, shopping can also be seen as a form of material consumption since it involves buying tangible items. When participants described consumption in the first year of divorce from an emotional standpoint, they revealed instances of material and experiential consumption. Tessa explicated how material items are used in the first year of divorce:

Part of buying things is just making your kids feel secure. I mean, they’re so insecure when you’re getting a divorce. They don’t know what’s going on. Everybody’s talking about money and who’s paying and who’s getting money and fighting about weekends and holidays. I think that to make things seem okay, even if you’re not okay financially, I think you do use [material items] as buffers.

Tessa admitted that the chaos of divorce could result in supplementary consumption in order to “make things seem okay” to children, even if it stretched finances. This shows how divorce-induced stressors such as money and fighting about weekends and holidays can increase spending. Moreover, these stressors delineate parents’ worries as they adjust to divorce. Intriguingly, Tessa continued to describe how divorce initially influenced her consumption practices:

So, like, the first Christmas she wasn’t with me and she spent Christmas day with her dad—horrible! So I decided this is gonna be the best Christmas ever, and I can’t remember what her Santa present was, but I think you feel so bad that you put your kids through divorce that you’re gonna make it up to them. And of course one of the ways you make it up to them is by, you know, going out to someplace nice or going shopping or we’re gonna do a super vacation this year because, you know, we’re gonna make sure it’s great.

Here, Tessa illustrates how parents consume to compensate for the negative effects of divorce on children, particularly during the early stages. She comforted her divorce-based worries about not spending Christmas with Hannah via consumption. Similarly, as Michael stressed, “My goal was really just completing [Tyler’s] Christmas list like nothing’s changed this year. That was good for both of us.” Michael noted how spending money on Tyler was beneficial for both of them, which underscores how consumption can be enjoyable for parents and children alike. Overall, the first year of divorce produced a distinct set of worries—mainly concerns about the effects of divorce on children and self-doubts about one’s ability to fulfill the role of a divorced parent—that were consoled through consumption.

Nevertheless, coding revealed that *guilt* was the most commonly cited emotion in this study. Interestingly, guilt did not disappear over time. Divorced parents’ guilt occurred as a *three-step cycle*. First, because parents shared custody, divorce-related dilemmas centered on children. Second, these dilemmas complicated children’s lives. Third, guilt emerged as parents perceived how divorce adversely impacted their children. Each step of this cycle is described below, followed by a discussion of how guilt influences child-rearing consumption.

First, divorce requires parents to live independently but raise their children jointly. This results in divorce-specific quandaries that parents and children must solve. Participants articulated a wide range of divorce-related challenges. For instance, at the time the interviews took place, Tessa and Brian were rearranging Hannah’s schedule so she could live at Tessa’s house full-time but see Brian via extracurricular activities; Jessica was preparing to cohabitate with her boyfriend and his two daughters; Nancy and Michael

were meeting with a mediator to determine Tyler's post-divorce schedule; Leo was in a custody battle with his second wife; Amanda's long-term boyfriend had just moved out of her house; and Erica had increased the number of hours she had Emma so that her ex-husband could obtain a better paying job. Regardless of how long participants had been divorced, they continued to face divorce-related challenges.

The second step of the guilt cycle underscores how divorce dynamics continually produce complexities for children. In the most basic sense, divorce permanently changes children's daily lives. While divorced adults may return to pre-marital ways of being, their children must travel between parents' homes and manage the curveballs that come with having divorced parents. In the excerpt below, Jessica explained how divorce impacted her daughter Megan:

I mean, of course Megan would like her Dad and me to be back together. Umm, she likes my boyfriend, she likes his daughters, so she's okay with him moving in. But, you know, divorce sucks when you're a kid and it's hard to imagine that it would be better to be divorced than not be divorced. But, you know, I think from my perspective she is better off. She has a very stable home life with at least me [laughs], and pretty stable with her dad.

This indicates that over time parents may perceive divorce as an improvement for the family whereas children may not. Jessica even noted that Megan preferred her pre-divorce lifestyle. Nonetheless, parents and their children alike must continue on with their lives after divorce, and Jessica has decided to cohabitate. Ultimately, steps one and two are inevitable—divorcing as a parent generates child-centered dilemmas that increase the complexities of children's lives.

The third step clarifies why divorced parents experience guilt. All participants stressed that their children did not instigate or cause the divorce. This leaves parents

responsible for the adverse effects of divorce, especially concerning children. As Nancy remarked:

I think the hard part about the divorce is that it was my choice, so I'm carrying *that*. I'm the one who pushed it. I'm the one who said this isn't working for *me*. So if anybody's gonna take the hit it's gonna be me. So maybe that's why I get so emotional about it.

Since Nancy made the decision to divorce, she felt liable for any ensuing issues that affected Tyler. Additionally, she affirmed that holding herself accountable for divorce had emotional consequences. Using this same logic, participants experienced guilt because they caused the predicaments that their children confronted in steps one and two. Feelings of guilt emerged as parent's blamed themselves for the impact divorce had on children. Furthermore, participants in this study demonstrated that parents' guilty emotions endure because they understand that children deal with the repercussions of divorce in their day-to-day lives.

In essence, novel divorce-related dilemmas constantly arise (step one) and predominantly affect their children's lives (step two). This generates guilt because parents feel responsible for children's divorce-related hardships (step three). In the excerpt below, Janet incorporates all three of aspects of divorced parents' guilt. Although Janet has been divorced for eight years, she still experiences negative emotions because of the impact divorce had on her twins, Stephen and Sarah:

Oh gosh, I feel anger, frustration, horrible sadness, guilt [long pause]. I would struggle, unless I thought about it for a long time, to come up with anything positive about the divorce, honestly. And I talk to [Stephen and Sarah] about the divorce a lot. I feel terrible. This wasn't their choice—it's no kid's choice for their parents to get a divorce and they were *really* young, so they've had to deal with it their whole lives. It's all they know. Umm, hopefully someday they'll understand, but today they don't. It just means their life is hard. I try and make their life and transitions and all as simple as I can. I make it all about them. Not in any way spoiling them, but if they're having a difficult day because of the divorce, it's not their fault they're

having a difficult day—that’s what we did to create that for them. So I try to have extra sympathy and patience.

Janet illustrated how deep internal emotions endure years after the divorce had been finalized. Her feelings of “anger, frustration, horrible sadness, [and] guilt” persevered because the consequences of divorce for Stephen and Sarah never end. She also reinforced the idea that parents are solely responsible for the unfavorable effects of divorce. In sum, Janet exemplified how *divorced parents continuously experience guilt because children must continually deal with the incessant ramifications of divorce in their daily lives.*

Importantly, guilt is an emotion that motivates individuals to adjust behavior (Stets and Turner 2006). This may explain why multiple studies have found that parental guilt increases child-rearing consumption (Schor 2004; Paul 2008; Pugh 2009). It is not a surprise that the guilt that participants in this study experienced increased spending. As Leo noted:

I mean, there was a period of time when I was [divorced and] traveling a lot, and you know, when you get the guilt you just buy stuff. I remember there were a couple weeks in a row when I was just buying gifts and bringing them home and you know, the kids sort of said they sucked. I mean they weren’t anything. They were like a top, right? We’re talking a \$5 gift you get at the airport.

Leo recognized how a lack of time with his children caused him to purchase objects to compensate for his absence. Moreover, he attributed atypical spending to “guilt,” which proves how this emotion can change parents’ behavior and compel consumption. Significantly, these divorced parents illustrated how guilt caused an increase in material and experiential consumption. Earlier in this study, Nancy criticized Michael for “over-indulging in activities” with Tyler post-divorce. In response to a question regarding how divorce influenced consumption, Michael stated:

I'd love to say "no" my priorities don't change, but of course they do. I mean, back in the summer I was just sort of reeling. So there was potentially some over-compensation, but the over-compensation had a lot to do with the fact that I felt bad that I couldn't be with Tyler as much—It's the guilt. So like, you know, the circus came to town one time and I said, "You know what, we've never gone to the circus." Looked online, tickets were \$50 for the both of us—it made sense. I've never done that, ever! Literally went online and in ten minutes bought tickets. We did it and had fun...So our activity level went up just because I was tired of waiting around and not seeing [Tyler].

Michael's guilt emerged because the divorce reduced the amount of time he got to be with Tyler. He acknowledged that these feelings caused him to over-compensate and consume in ways that deviated from his consumption practices pre-divorce. When Michael defended his purchases from an emotional perspective, his spending no longer seemed as irrational as Nancy implied. Both Leo and Michael demonstrated that feelings of guilt increased child-rearing consumption materially and experientially.

But how does consumption help with guilt? As Janet asserted, "when you buy something for your children and it makes them happy, it by extension makes you happy." Accordingly, parents consumed with the hope that the purchases would elicit positive responses from their children and that these positive reactions would work to counteract negative emotions. The following passages acknowledged the pleasurable feelings associated with child-rearing consumption:

Well, I think really, as a mother, you just want your kids to be happy. I just want her to be happy. And whether it's, you know, going underwear shopping at Victoria's Secret or whatever, I just find ways to spend time with her.

...

Buying her things maybe lets her know that I'm someone that loves her and cares about her. That feels good, I guess.

...

Megan is always so excited and appreciative when I buy her stuff. She loves everything that I get her.

Q: How does that make you feel as her parent?

Pretty good [laughs]. I rock!

...

I guess the thing with Hannah is, you know, obviously [pause]—she is very appreciative and she never expects anything. She's just a very grateful, appreciative child. And so I think that has a lot to do—honestly, I think she gets more because of that. I mean she'd get plenty anyway, but it does make buying things for her a lot easier because, you know, she's a good kid so I like doing it.

These quotes show how spending produced positive feelings for the divorced parents interviewed. This illustrates how child-rearing consumption can be used to counteract negative feelings, including guilt stemming from divorce. Given that divorce-based guilt is cyclical and endures for years, distinct divorce-specific spending practices may also persist in order to offset such feelings. In other words, perhaps because divorce parent's guilty emotions last for years, increased consumption also ensues.

In sum, divorced parents' emotions affect child-rearing consumption. Participants' emotions in the first year were characterized by shame and distinct worries. Shame caused interviewees to assess their role in the family, which created worries surrounding their capacity to handle divorced parenting. Nevertheless, shame and adjunct worries dissipated as parents adjusted to divorce, while feelings of guilt endured. Participants continually experienced feelings of guilt because their children lived with the repercussions of divorce in their everyday lives. Moreover, because guilt is an emotion that motivates individuals to modify behavior, it caused divorced parents to amplify their material and experiential consumption.

Overall, Realistic Consumption acknowledges the ways in which divorce impacts child-rearing consumption practices. Touching on the financial, logistical, and emotional dilemmas of divorce allowed participants to candidly talk about spending. This discourse rationalized parents' consumption by uncovering divorce-specific predicaments that were prominent and patterned throughout interviews. Realistic consumption provides a more accurate sense of divorce's influence on spending because it leaves out parents' ideal consumer façade.

C. The Interaction Between Ideal and Realistic Consumption

Participants use ideal consumption to represent what they believe to be culturally appropriate consumption. These divorced parents persistently and repeatedly accentuated the four facets of ideal consumption throughout their interviews because they realized that such practices are favorable in U.S. society. Notably, while ideal consumption equals appropriate consumption, realistic consumption indicates inappropriate consumption. This study exposes how society's perception of culturally appropriate consumption does not leave room for divorce-specific spending. This may be because, in the end, it appears that divorce does indeed increase child-rearing consumption. As one mother contended:

I think the divorce definitely affects [consumption]. I think parents do try to compensate [for divorce] and I think kids *get* twice as much. I mean, our friends are going through a divorce and our kids were talking to their kids and the girls were like, "Look, you get two birthdays, you get two Christmases, you get stuff at Dad's, you get stuff at Mom's." So it was definitely like, trying to comfort their friend by telling her, "Hey, you're gonna score! Your Mom's gonna cave in on this and you're gonna be able to do this." I think kids are smart enough to manipulate the situation. You know, like make mom feel bad or make dad feel bad.

This comment suggests that both parents and children recognize divorce's impact on children's consumption. Due to the nature of the interview questions, participants were forced to reveal divorce's influence on spending. Yet to avoid being negatively stereotyped as over-consuming divorced parents, participants accentuated culturally appropriate consumption that projected the image of an ideal parent consumer. Participants' incongruent discourses emerged as they tried to bolster divorce-related consumption with ideal consumption tactics. Importantly, although realistic consumption works to legitimize divorced parental consumption practices, society's perception of culturally appropriate consumption does not allow for the dilemmas of divorce.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I attempted to determine how divorced parents make consumption choices on behalf of their children. Interviews revealed two distinct discourses I termed Ideal Consumption and Realistic Consumption. Divorced parents portrayed themselves as ideal consumers by emphasizing experiential consumption, symbolic deprivation, and defensive othering. This exemplified how participants tried to counteract stereotypes that render divorced parents as over-consumers who want to buy their children's love. The ideal dialogue also indicates what divorced parents consider culturally appropriate consumption.

In contrast, the section on realistic consumption illustrated how parent's spending is shaped by the financial, logistical, and emotional dilemmas of divorce. By and large, this strand of talk highlights the ways in which divorce increased child-rearing consumption. Still, participants saw divorce-related consumption as culturally inappropriate. Divergent discourses surfaced as parents tried to offset realistic consumption with ideal consumption practices. Ultimately, this study indicates that divorced parent's perception of culturally appropriate child-rearing consumption excludes divorce-specific spending.

Although there are multiple studies on divorce and consumption, none specifically address divorce's influence on child-rearing consumption. Moreover, because divorce research is outdated, there is no information on how divorce interacts with contemporary child-rearing consumerism. My research also differs from existing literature in that it examines divorce at the micro level. This study adds a novel perspective to our sociological understanding of divorce and consumerism because it shows how U.S.

society's perception of culturally appropriate child-rearing consumption does not leave room for spending related to divorce.

To gain a better understanding of these findings, future research should investigate divorced parental consumerism in depth. It would be interesting to break down finances, logistics, and emotions into separate lines of study with larger samples so that each aspect could be looked at in more detail. In particular, I would like to see studies that explore how divorced low-income and/or part-time working mothers juggle finances, child consumerism, and joint custody arrangements. Studies also need to include older teens and adult children of divorced parents. In addition, we need research on how divorce consumer stereotypes affect parents. Most importantly, I believe sociologists need to figure out why cultural ideals do not acknowledge the effects of divorce on consumption, given that it is such a prevalent family form today.

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VIII. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Characteristics

Name (Gender)	Age	Occupation	Children (Age/Gender)	Number of Divorces (Year)	Number of Remarriages (Year)	Additional Notes
Amanda (F)	41	Human Resources Recruiter	Ashley (7/F)	1 (2006)	0	Short interview (16 minutes); seemed uncomfortable talking about consumption.
Aubrey (F)	39	Finance Manager	Anna (11/F) Kimberly (9/F)	1 (2007)	1 (2009)	Damaged recording; used handwritten notes.
Brian (M)	72	Retired	Hannah (13/F)	2 (1992; 2006)	2 (1966; 1992)	Short interview (14 minutes); seemed very defensive. Previously married to Tessa. First wife passed away in 1965.
Erica (F)	41	Bank Manager	Emma (10/F)	1 (2005)	0	
Janet (F)	44	Registered Nurse	Stephen (8/M) Sarah (8/F)	1 (2003)	0	Cohabitates with boyfriend.
Jessica (F)	38	Government Affairs Manager	Megan (8/F)	1 (2008)	0	Cohabitates with boyfriend and his two daughters since 2010.
Leo (M)	40	Senior Engineer	Ali (17/F) Drew (14/M) Elise (12/F) Kirk (8/M)	2 (1998; 2003)	2 (1999; 2005)	Interview mainly focused on Elise because she is his only child from divorce that is within the age range for this study.

Michael (M)	42	Sales Engineer in Telecommunications	Tyler (6/M)	1 (2010)	0	Previously married to Nancy.
Nancy (F)	38	Licensed Mental Health Counselor in Private Practice	Tyler (6/M)	1 (2010)	0	Previously married to Michael.
Tessa (F)	46	Financial Planner	Hannah (13/F)	3 (1992; 2006; 2009)	2 (1992; 2007)	Previously married to Brian.

Appendix B: Divorced Parent Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about your family and the changes that have taken place since the divorce.
2. What do your kids like to do?
3. What are some activities that your family does as a whole? Does your ex-spouse also participate in these activities?
4. Does your family go on vacation? If yes, please describe the most recent family trip and the ultimate goal or purpose of this outing.
5. Please explain the last “big gift” you bought for your child and why you felt that this item was important.
6. Are there any items that you refuse to buy for your kids? Please explain your reasoning.
7. Has there ever been a time when your child wanted you to buy something that you didn’t want to buy? What did you do?
8. How does your child usually react when you buy him/her a present? How does this make you feel?
9. How important are material items to your child? Please explain your reasoning and how this makes you feel as his/her parent.
10. How do you decide and prioritize what to buy for your child? Has this changed since the divorce? Can you give me an example?
11. Since the divorce, do you feel you have become more sensitive to your child’s social belonging within his/her friendship circle? Additionally, have you ever purchased items to help connect your child with his or her peers because of this?
12. Does spending money on your child take on a different meaning now that you are a divorced parent? Please explain.

13. Have you ever used material items in an attempt to buffer the effects of divorce on your child? How so?
14. What emotions do you experience when you reflect upon the divorce and the impact it had on your child?
15. Have you ever tried to compensate in some way for putting your child through a divorce? If yes, why did you feel this was necessary and what did you do?
16. How do you handle instances when your child appears upset or distressed over the divorce?
17. Did you and your ex-spouse establish any plans for how to handle instances when your child is upset over the divorce?
- If yes, can you describe your plan and did it include regulations regarding how to spend money on your child?
 - If no, do you and your ex-spouse handle such moments in a similar fashion or differently? Please explain.
18. Do you ever experience conflict with your ex-spouse over what to buy for your kid(s)? Can you tell me about a specific instance?
19. If you were to ask your child what the biggest difference is between how you and your ex-spouse spend money on him/her, what do you think he/she would say? Furthermore, how does that make you feel?
20. Does spending money on your child benefit *you* in any way? How so?

Appendix C: Divorced Parent Informed Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Divorced Parents
September 29, 2010

Please read the following material that explains this research study. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you want to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits—if any—are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Krissi Kuni, an undergraduate student in the University of Colorado at Boulder's Department of Sociology, 327 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309. This project is being done under the direction of Professor Amy Wilkins, Department of Sociology, 327 UCB. Krissi Kuni can be reached at (503) 459-3549. Professor Amy Wilkins can be reached at (303) 492-7681.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This research study is about how divorced parents make choices regarding what to buy for their children. Previous research has examined purchasing decisions, but not in the context of divorce. This study will investigate how consumption practices are shaped by emotional, financial, and logistical dilemmas of parenting after a divorce.

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a divorced parent with a child between the ages of four and ten.

Thirty participants will be invited to participate in this research study.

PROCEDURES

Taking part in this study is completely **voluntary**. You do not have to participate if you don't want to. You may also leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Description of Procedures

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to partake in an in-depth interview with the principal investigator Krissi Kuni. The interview will take place in person and will consist of twenty open-ended questions.

Description of Interview Questions

Initially, basic questions will be asked about your family in order for the principle investigator to gain a solid understanding of your family's dynamics. You will then be inquired about your rationale when buying items for your child and how the divorce has impacted your spending habits. Additionally, you will be asked more personal questions concerning the following topics:

- A. Particular *emotions* that you (or your child) experience as a result of the divorce and the ways in which these emotions influence what you buy for your child. For example, "How do you handle instances when your child appears upset or distressed over the divorce?"
- B. *Feelings you experience in regards to your ex-spouse* and his or her spending habits. For instance, "Have you ever experienced conflict with your ex-spouse over what to buy for your kids?"

Time Commitment to Complete Research Procedures

Participating should take approximately an hour of your time, depending on how long the interview takes.

Research Location

Participation will take place at the location where you feel comfortable and at ease talking about your divorce. If this setting requires you to travel, all accommodations will be made to make the process as easy and convenient as possible.

Audio and/or Video Recordings

Participation in this research may include audio taping. These tapes will be used to ensure that interview transcripts are detailed and accurate. The tapes will be retained until April 2011, and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Those individuals who will have access to these tapes only include the principal investigator Krissi Kuni.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks to participation in this study except potential psychological discomfort due to sensitive questions regarding divorce and/or how parents choose to spend money on their child. The probability of this occurring is low and if discomfort does take place it is expected to be minimal and short lived.

You will not be asked about any illegal activities, but if you should discuss such activities, the information could be requested by authorities such as the police or court system.

There are some things that you might tell us that we CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:

- Child abuse or neglect.
- A crime you or others plan to commit.
- Harm that may come to you or others.

BENEFITS

You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, your participation in this study may help us understand how consumerism affects divorced parents and the relationship they have with their child. Moreover, this research will add to existing sociological knowledge by potentially highlighting emotions that are unique to divorced parents and detecting the degree to which these emotions are alleviated through spending money on one's child.

COST TO PARTICIPANT

You will be responsible for costs you incur by participating in this study. Depending on where the interview takes place, you may have to pay for transportation and/or parking, but the principal investigator will make every attempt to accommodate participants when arranging interview times and locations.

ENDING YOUR PARTICIPATION

You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) or refuse to participate in any procedure for any reason. Refusing to participate in this study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. In order to maintain confidentiality, physical data—including hardcopy interview transcripts and audio recordings—will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the principal investigator's bedroom. As an added precaution, coded IDs will be created to replace identifiers and the original identifiers will be destroyed. All electronically stored data will be kept on the principal investigators private computer in a locked file that is password protected. The principal investigator will be the only person who has access to all forms of data, including audiotapes. In the final report, all subjects will have pseudonyms that can be tracked back to their coded

ID but not the original identifier. After the study is finished in April 2011, all physical and electronic data will be destroyed.

Other than the researchers, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protection and the University of Colorado at Boulder Institutional Review Board may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this research, you should ask the investigator before signing this form. If you should have questions or concerns during or after your participation, please contact Krissi Kuni at (503) 459-3549.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, Rm A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.

AUTHORIZATION

I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing four pages.

Name of Participant (printed) _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____.

(Also initial all pages of the consent form.)

Divorced Parents Needed for Research Study!

This study involves research concerning how divorced parents make choices about what to buy on behalf of their children. The intention of this study is to gain a better understanding of how consumption choices are shaped by the emotional, financial, and logistical dilemmas of parenting after divorce.

- Participation involves a one hour in-depth interview where you will be asked a series of open-ended questions by the principal investigator Krissi Kuni.
- Benefits: While there are no direct benefits, this research will contribute to our overall knowledge regarding the ways in which divorce influences how parents determine what to purchase for their children.
- Risks: There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this study.
- Fully confidential and anonymous.

For further information about this research study and/or about the rights of research subjects, you may contact:

- Principal Investigator: Krissi Kuni (503) 459-3549
- Faculty Advisor: Amy Wilkins (303) 492-7681
- The Institutional Review Board (303) 735-3702

Participation in this study is voluntary and there is no penalty or loss of benefits if one refuses to participate. Subjects have the right to withdraw from the study at any point.